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One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

July 21, 2023

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, D.C., 20500

Dear President Biden

We write to express grave concern over the potential re-issuance or extension of Syria General License 23, which was issued by your administration in the immediate aftermath of the February 6, 2023 earthquake.

General License 23 authorizes direct transactions with the Assad regime related to “earthquake relief efforts” for an unprecedented 180 days. Not only does the license fail to define the scope of “earthquake relief efforts,” leaving the door open for bad actors to manipulate the Syria earthquake response for their own gain, its duration is nearly twice as long as a typical disaster relief response.

General License 23 was framed as a specific, time-limited response to mitigate unforeseen consequences of a natural disaster. The license absolutely should not serve as a long-term authorization, particularly when there are existing humanitarian exemptions, as well as waiver authorities, already built into our Syria sanctions regime which includes Public Laws like the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (22 U.S.C. 8791 note). Existing General Licenses that pre-date General License 23 are broad in scope, cover a range of humanitarian activities, and provide sufficient flexibility to navigate the complex operating environment in Syria.

Instead of using a disaster-specific license to address presumed challenges to the Syria humanitarian response, this administration should work through the Office of Foreign Asset Control’s Assistant Directors for Licensing, Regulatory Affairs, and Sanctions Compliance and Evasion to disseminate information regarding the general licenses already in place. It is also critical that your administration engage with a range of relevant actors, including financial institutions, to ensure any potential challenges are adequately understood so that guidance can be revised accordingly.

In May, the Arab League welcomed Assad back into the fold with open arms after more than a decade of isolation; and numerous countries actively seek investment in Assad held areas in contravention of our Syria sanctions regime. A decision to extend the needlessly broad General License 23 as our regional partners seek to reengage with the murderous Assad regime undermines the efficacy of our sanctions and, by extension, the prospects for accountability for the Syrian people. Sanctions are intended to compel behavior change. Overly permissive General Licenses like General License 23 undermine these goals and empower Assad and his cronies.

We strongly urge you to allow General License 23 to expire on August 8 as intended in order to preserve the integrity of our Syria sanctions.

Sincerely,



MICHAEL T. McCAUL
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee



JOE WILSON
Chairman
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa,
and Central Asia



JAMES R. BAIRD
Member of Congress



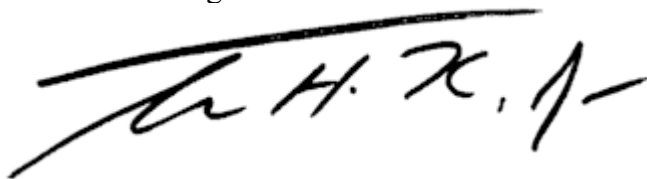
BRIAN MAST
Member of Congress



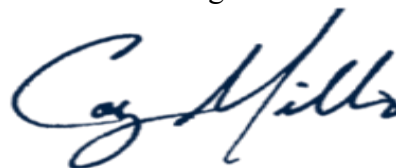
AUMUA AMATA COLEMAN RADEWAGEN
Member of Congress



FRENCH HILL
Member of Congress



THOMAS H. KEAN, JR.
Member of Congress



CORY MILLS
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Keith Self". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping "K" and "S".

KEITH SELF
Member of Congress